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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM A/S DEWEY; EAP/BCLTV; DRL/IRF

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SUBJECT: A/S DEWEY IN VIETNAM CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: LAM DONG PROVINCE

REF: A) HCMC 0833 B) HCMC 0842

1. (SBU) Summary: In recent meetings with Lam Dong provincial authorities, PRM Assistant Secretary Dewey expressed strong U.S. concern about the treatment of ethnic minorities and a lack of religious freedom for unregistered Protestant house churches. Lam Dong officials stressed that the practice of Christianity and Buddhism is open and widespread, and said they were considering measures to accelerate the pace of church registrations. In the meantime, house churches would be allowed to operate while their paperwork was being completed. So far, Lam Dong has registered 12 Protestant churches under the umbrella of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). Another 168 house churches are in the process of applying for registration. It is unclear how many other churches do not wish to apply at this time. Provincial officials emphasized poverty as the biggest threat to the welfare of ethnic minorities and asked for assistance in attracting U.S. investments. On the whole, Lam Dong province seems to represent a slightly more progressive model of religious tolerance in the Central Highlands, although there are continuing reports of problems. PRM Assistant Secretary Dewey was accompanied by DCM/Charge, HCMC Acting CG, Refugee Resettlement Section chief, and EAP/BCLTV Vietnam Desk Officer. End summary.

2. (U) In a meeting with Lam Dong Provincial People's Committee Chairman Phan Thien, A/S Dewey expressed his pleasure at returning to Dalat for the first time in nearly 40 years, setting a cordial tone for the discussion that followed. Mr. Thien provided a relatively positive overview of current conditions in the province, despite its underdeveloped economy. He said the introduction of coffee as a cash crop had initially been a great boon for ethnic minorities. During the period of rising coffee prices a few years ago, as many as 140,000 hectares of land had been planted with coffee and many towns and villages had bought a lot of machinery and equipment to support coffee farming. However, the more recent downturn in coffee prices had affected ethnic minority groups badly. Their income from coffee crops had declined dramatically, and they had heavy debts still to pay from the equipment purchases of previous years. He hoped that a gradual rise again in coffee prices might help alleviate the situation. He also said the province was trying to build more roads this year and would strive to extend the electrical network to the last three villages still without electricity.

3. (U) On the issue of religious freedom, Mr. Thien stated directly that Vietnam in general -- and Lam Dong province in particular -- enjoy freedom of religion. He called the practice of Catholicism and Buddhism "very good now," noting there are numerous new churches and pagodas to be seen on the road to Dalat. He claimed there is no town in the province where religion is a problem. Chairman Thien then went on to state very matter-of-factly that he was sure, however, that we wanted to know about policies toward Protestants. He started by noting that there are over 65,000 Protestants in the province, an increase since pre-1975 days, and that many of the Protestants are residents of ethnic minority villages.

4. (SBU) Mr. Thien expressed concern that many believers seek to use the cover of religion for what is actually political activity, citing the Dega group in particular. A/S Dewey responded that he had spoken with many sincere believers on this trip, e.g., in Pleiku (ref B), who were also concerned about staying away from such political activity. A/S Dewey said clearly that the USG recognizes the territorial integrity of Vietnam and does not support the Dega movement or its calls for a separate state. However, Mr. Dewey said the U.S. believes the Dega political group to be relatively small, and that the vast majority of Protestant believers simply want to practice their faith. It is essential that believers be allowed to gather together for religious purposes.

5. (SBU) Chairman Thien indicated he understood this distinction and noted there are now 12 Protestant churches officially recognized in Lam Dong Province. Religious Affairs Committee (CRA) director Bang noted that there are a total of 180 Protestant churches in Lam Dong. Concerning the question of the other 168 churches gaining recognition, Mr. Bang emphasized the role of the SECV in establishing charters for Protestant churches as a first step. After that, the CRA would work with the SECV to recognize additional churches. Mr. Bang also raised the need to obtain funding in order to build churches for these congregations. He

said that as churches established charters through the SECV and constructed church buildings, they could become recognized fairly quickly. In response, A/S Dewey emphasized that a church is more than just a building; it is also a community. The important issue is to allow for freedom of assembly -- the ability to gather together, whether in a church or a house. Provincial leaders pointed out their priority is helping groups build churches and to gain formal recognition, but in the meantime, they would permit congregations to gather in smaller groups in houses to worship together.

16. (SBU) A/S Dewey asked for confirmation that the 168 unrecognized but known Protestant churches can gather without interference, even in houses. CRA director Bang confirmed this to be the case. Mr. Bang said it was "important to take care of the spiritual needs of the people," as well as their material needs. He also stated that the CRA would try to "facilitate" the registration process, so the 168 unregistered churches could register in a relatively short time. When A/S Dewey made a point of stating that the USG does not support the Dega movement, Mr. Bang responded that his committee "understands the difference" and "tries to distinguish" between those in the Dega movement with a political agenda and those who are "true believers." A/S Dewey welcomed this news and said he hoped Consulate General staff would be able to follow up in the near future to see some house churches in action.

17. (U) In his meetings with provincial officials, A/S Dewey encouraged them to improve investment and foreign development assistance opportunities in the province. Having heard their comments about the lower level of economic development in Lam Dong, he hoped the province would make it easier for U.S. companies to participate in economic development. Chairman Thien noted that Lam Dong is far away from the economic powerhouse of Ho Chi Minh City. It has a limited road network, a small airport and no direct access to the sea. But the provincial capital of Dalat, which already attracts domestic and some foreign tourists, is planning to upgrade the airport to receive international flights. Authorities are hopeful that this will help Dalat develop into a major tourist center, and felt there may be a role to play for American companies in developing the tourism and hospitality industry. A/S Dewey also urged provincial leaders to consider foreign assistance projects that USAID could assist with, and said he hoped the Embassy would be permitted to follow up on this subject.

18. (SBU) On a visit later in the day to the village of Suoi Tong A, A/S Dewey and his group saw close-up the slowly improving, though still underdeveloped, state of the countryside. Most of Suoi Tong A had electricity; a school building had been recently built; and most of the houses were of reasonably solid wood and stone construction. The fields surrounding the village were all planted and seemed to be filled with thriving crops. In stops at two different houses, A/S Dewey heard from the residents about conditions in their village. While life is still very hard, they said that the building of roads and the electrification of the village have improved conditions in the past few years. Both Catholics and Protestants live in Suoi Tong A, but no one we spoke with complained of any concerted effort to discourage them from practicing their religion. While there were no churches in the village itself, Catholics are able to attend a church down the main road a few kilometers. Protestants informed us that they were able to gather among themselves informally without interference. There are about eight such "house churches." They have been told they can operate in small groups until a larger church is built and registered, when they will be expected to consolidate and attend that church.

19. (SBU) One light moment came during a short stop en route to Suoi Thong A at an ethnic minority handicraft shop. A/S Dewey and his group browsed through the handicrafts and purchased several items such as bags and silk fabrics. As A/S Dewey attempted to bargain with the shop lady to lower the price a little bit, she shook her head, pointed to the Catholic church across the road, and said with a gentle smile, "God sets the prices." It turned out the shop is owned and run by the Catholic church to raise money for its ethnic minority congregation.

110. (SBU) Comment: Of the three provinces visited by A/S Dewey on his trip through the Central Highlands, Lam Dong seemed to present the most forward-looking and progressive image. The provincial authorities genuinely seem to be trying to improve conditions for the ethnic minority population through economic development. The over-reliance on coffee as a new cash crop may have backfired due to the drop in the world market price (caused in no small part by Vietnam's additional supply), but prices have recovered off of their lows. Road building and rural electrification seem to have reached even the smaller and more remote villages, increasing access to markets and improving their living conditions. The growth of the tourism industry in Dalat should also spur economic development. Nonetheless, Lam Dong remains a relatively poor, underdeveloped province and its ethnic minority groups remain on the lower end of the economic and social spectrum within the province.

111. (SBU) In the area of religious practice, Lam Dong provincial officials seemed more willing to discuss the issue, with less

defensiveness and with some apparent plan in mind for further registration of churches. On the drive into Dalat from neighboring Dak Lak province, A/S Dewey observed what appeared to be a number of recently constructed Catholic churches in several villages along the highway. The mindset of provincial leaders that Protestant congregations must build "real" churches as a precondition for being recognized is a stumbling block, both physically and philosophically. While the apparent tolerance of Protestants gathering in houses until "real" churches can be built and registered is a welcome sign, we must point out that the majority of Suoi Tong A's Protestants are affiliated with the GVN-recognized SECV anyway. The Consulate General will follow up with additional visits, and to verify progress toward registering at least some of the 168 identified but unrecognized house churches who wish to register.

112. (U) This cable was not cleared by A/S Dewey before his departure.

YAMAUCHI